



Rhode Island Success Story

Fenestration Architectural Products

What do the Rhode Island Convention Center, the Westin Hotel, T. F. Green Airport, the Manchester Street Power Station, and the new Providence Public Safety Complex all have in common? They have windows or window components from Fenestration Architectural Products, LLC.

Fenestration, based in East Providence, RI, was established in 1991 by Abdel M. Elsawabi, and began as a manufacturer of aluminum windows for commercial projects.

Abdel's quest for entrepreneurship started in the early nineties, during the height of an economic recession and Rhode Island's banking crisis. His employer at the time was one of those victims.

Abdel Elsawabi had moved from California to Rhode Island for employment. He was an architect by trade, with a degree from Cairo University in Egypt, and started work in operations with a company that manufactured aluminum windows. This experience provided the foundation for Abdel's venture. When the company that employed him went out of business, as a result of the banking crisis, Abdel decided to start his own small aluminum window manufacturing company.

Abdel's venture started with the development of a business plan and the assistance of an investor to provide him with the necessary capital. He also received free services from the Rhode Island Small Business Development Center (RISBDC) at Bryant College, a program sponsored in part by the U. S. Small Business Administration (SBA).

The RISBDC provided Abdel with a consultant to assist him with the development of his business plan. He also took advantage of a number of educational training programs offered by the RISBDC.

Fenestration's first contract was with the U. S. Navy in Groton, CT. As the business grew its focus changed from manufacturing to installation.

In 1999, two partners, with many years of combined experience in the glass industry, joined Fenestration. The company changed its name to Fenestration Architectural Products, LLC to accommodate the shift in its core business and also focused on informing potential customers of the company's experience and knowledge of working with a variety of building materials, other than glass.

Expansion also brought about the need for the company to find alternate means to finance new projects. Early on the company obtained financing from the Minority Investment Development Corporation, a SBA lender.



**Abdel M. Elsawabi, President
Fenestration Architectural Products**

Continued growth brought about the need for additional capital to finance new projects.

Financing was obtained in 2000 through Bank Rhode Island with a line of credit guaranteed by SBA under its CAPLines Working Capital Loan Program. The CAPLines program is an umbrella loan program that provides small businesses with working capital for short term or cyclical working capital needs. Growth has not been without difficulty or challenges. One project, located in Wisconsin, proved to be difficult to manage and costly too. When the contractor failed to make its final payment, Fenestration pursued payment through legal channels. Legal costs accumulated and eventually exceeded the amount of money owed to Fenestration. In retrospect, Abdel said he would have preferred to resolve the issue with this business through negotiation rather than litigation and considers negotiation to be an important business skill. Today, Fenestration employs 35 people, and in 2001 posted sales that exceeded \$5.0 million. Abdel attributes the success of Fenestration to its talented employees and the company's commitment to providing its customers with excellent service.

Abdel considers Fenestration to be a relatively young company that must continue to thrive and grow by winning contracts and maintaining a reputation for quality work. When asked what he liked most about operating his own small business he said, "It's a challenge every day and at the end of each day you feel you have accomplished something."

Abdel had this bit of advice for others interested in starting their own business, "If you don't try, you are never going to learn." He added, "Decide what it is that you want to do, know your market, and try to find a niche for yourself."